

The Knight's Tale

By Geoffrey Chaucer
Adapted by Bryon Cahill

Ech man for hymself.

—“The Knight’s Tale I,” line 1182



*Once on a time, as old tales tell to us,
There was a duke whose name was
Theseus: Of Athens he was lord and governor,
And in his time was such a conqueror
That greater was there not beneath the sun.*

One day, as Theseus was returning home, he came upon a group of wailing women at his front gate. “What folk are you that at my home—coming disturb my triumph with this **dolorous** thing?” cried Theseus. “Do you so much envy my honor that you thus complain and cry? Or who has wronged you now, or who offended? Come, tell me whether it

may be amended; and tell me, why are you clothed thus, in black?”

The eldest of the women nearly fainted from exhaustion. She caught herself and began to speak. “Lord ... Have mercy on our woe and our distress. Some drop of pity, of your gentleness, upon us wretched women, oh, let fall! For see, lord, there is no one of us all that has not been a duchess or a queen; now we are captives, as may well be seen. We have been waiting through a long fortnight; now help us, lord, since it is in your might.”

The woman told Theseus that her husband and many soldiers were killed in the war at Thebes. And Creon, the Lord of Thebes, refused to give the dead a proper burial. “He, in despite and out of

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tyranny, to do the dead a shame and villainy, of all our husbands, lying among the slain, has piled the bodies in a heap, amain, and will not suffer them, nor give consent, to buried be, or burned, nor will relent, but sets his dogs to eat them, out of spite.”

Theseus was outraged (or perhaps just blood-thirsty). He led his army to Thebes, killed Creon, and easily conquered the city. As Theseus's troops were gathering the dead from the battlefield, they found two soldiers who were still alive. They were Arcite and Palamon, royal cousins who fought bravely against Theseus's army.

“We shall take them to Athens,” pronounced Theseus. “There in a prison cell will they lie for ever, without ransom, till they die.”

As the days and weeks passed, Arcite's and Palamon's battle wounds healed. The months slowly turned into years and the cousins began to lose hope of gaining their freedom. All they had was a window overlooking the royal garden and each other's friendship.

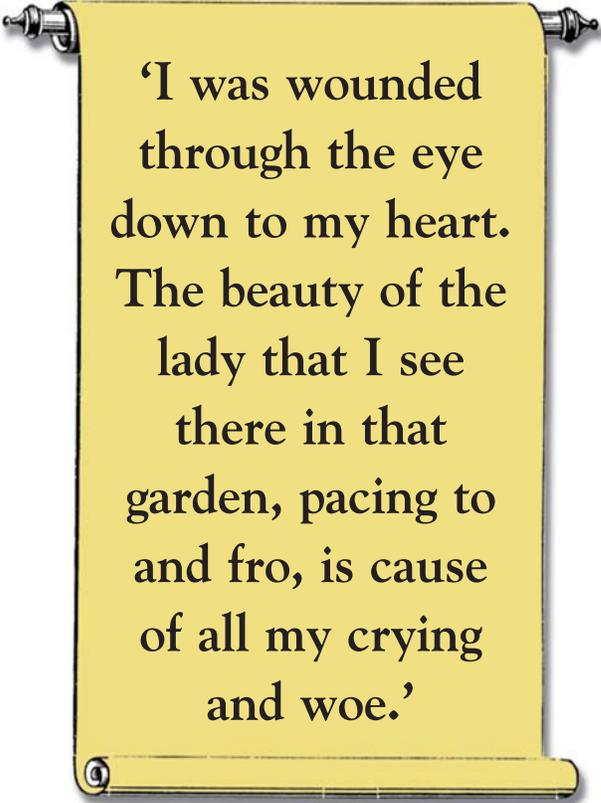
Then, one day, Palamon looked out the window and saw the most beautiful sight he had ever laid eyes on. Her name was Emily. She was Duke Theseus's sister-in-law, and Palamon tried his best not to break down and cry for the love he would never know.

Her yellow hair was braided in one tress behind her back, at least a full yard long. And in the garden, as the sun rose, she sauntered back and forth and through each close, gathering many a flower, white and red, to weave a delicate garland for her head.

“Ah!” Palamon cried out as his heart broke.

“My cousin,” Arcite rushed to Palamon's aid, “what ails you now that you have so deathly **pallor** on your brow? Why did you cry out? Who has offended you?”

“I was wounded through the eye down to my heart. The beauty of the lady that I see there in that garden, pacing to and fro, is cause of all my crying and my woe. I know not if she's woman or goddess, but Venus she is verily, I guess.” Palamon fell to his knees and continued, “O Venus, if it be thy will to be



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transfigured in this garden, thus before me, sorrowing wretch, oh now help us out of this prison to be soon escaped. And if it be my destiny is shaped, by fate, to die in durance, in bondage, have pity, then, upon our lineage that has been brought so low by tyranny.”

Arcite had never seen his cousin in such an emotional state. He leaned over and peered out the window to see what all the fuss was about. There, at the base of the prison tower, was Emily, stunning and marvelous. “The beauty slays me suddenly of her that wanders yonder in that place, and save I have her pity and her grace,” Arcite said, “that I at least may see her day by day, I am but dead; there is no more to say.”

“Do you say this in earnest or in play?” Palamon asked his cousin.

“Nay, earnest, now, I say! God help me, I am in no mood for play!”

“It will not prove,” Palamon said, “to your honor

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after so long a time to turn traitor to me.” But Arcite could not control his emotions. He too, was **smitten** by Emily. It mattered little though; both men were imprisoned in the tower and doomed to look on their love from afar, without any hope of getting closer. Their miserable lives just got worse.

After many months had passed, a man named Pirithous came to visit Duke Theseus. Pirithous was not only a friend of the Duke's but (as chance would have it) he was also a good friend of Arcite's. When Pirithous heard about Arcite's imprisonment, he begged Theseus to release his friend. Theseus finally agreed, but under one condition: that Arcite leave the country and never return, upon pain of death. Arcite was not happy. Said he, “Alas, the day that I was born! I'm in worse prison, now, and more forlorn; now am I doomed eternally to dwell no more in Purgatory, but in Hell.”

Arcite looked at his cousin with envy. “O my dear cousin Palamon,” said he, “Yours is the victory, and that is sure, for there, full happily, you may endure. In prison? Never, but in Paradise! Oh, well has Fortune turned for you the dice, who have the sight of her ...”

But Palamon thought Arcite got the better deal. “Alas!” said he, “Arcite, cousin mine, with all our **strife**, God knows, you've won the wine. You're walking, now, in Theban streets, at large, and all my woe you may from mind discharge. You may, too, since you've wisdom and manhood, assemble all the people of our blood and wage a war so sharp on this city that by some fortune, or by some treaty, you shall yet have that lady to your wife for whom I now must needs lay down my life.”

You lovers, now I ask you this question:

Who has the worse, Arcite or Palamon?

The one may see his lady day by day,

But yet in prison must he dwell for aye.

The other, where he wishes, he may go.

But never see his lady more, ah no.

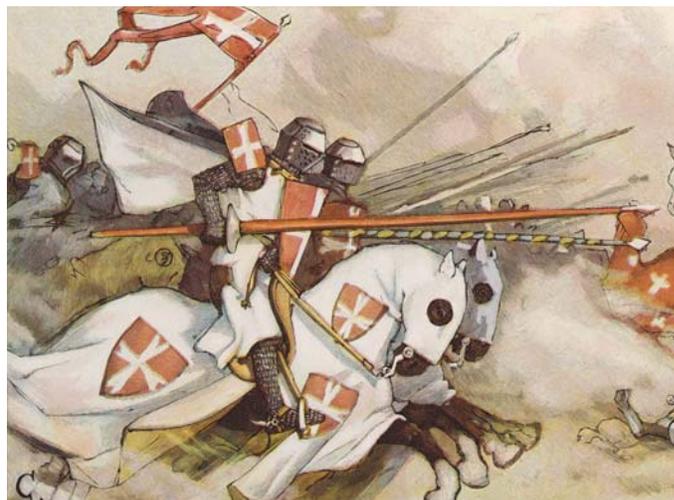
Now answer as you wish, all you that can.

For I will speak right on as I began.

After a short time in exile, Arcite's fears were confirmed. He would forever be unhappy if he could not gaze upon the face of his beloved Emily. So, ignoring Theseus's warning of death, Arcite returned to Athens and got a job as a servant in the lady Emily's household.

As Palamon watched his cousin's fortune from the tower, he began to contemplate thoughts of escape. But how?

One day, Palamon spoke with a soldier he had befriended and asked him for help. The soldier friend **procured** a sleeping potion for Palamon, who, in turn, used the drug on his watch guard. Once the guard was fast asleep, Palamon stole the keys and escaped.



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The first thing Palamon did with his freedom was to seek out his cousin and challenge him to a duel. “Arcite, oh you traitor wicked, now are you caught, that crave my lady so, for whom I suffer all this pain and woe, and are my blood, and know my secrets' store, as I have often told you heretofore, and have befooled the great Duke Theseus, and falsely changed your name and station thus: Either I shall be dead or you shall die. You shall not love my lady Emily, but I will love her, and none other, no; for I am Palamon, your mortal foe.”

Arcite pulled out a sword and replied, “By God that sits above! Were it not you are sick and mad for love, and that you have no weapon in this place, out of this grove you'd never move a pace.

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But meet your death right now, and at my hand. ... But in as much as you're a worthy knight, and willing to defend your love ... Hear now this word: tomorrow I'll come here armed and harnessed as a knight, and will bring arms for you, too, as you'll see; and choose the better and leave the worse for me. And meat and drink this very night I'll bring, enough for you, and clothes for your bedding. And if it be that you my lady win and slay me in this wood that now I'm in, then may you have your lady, for all of me." To all this Palamon replied, "I do agree."

The next morning, the two cousins fought each other in the woods. Just as the duel was getting serious, Duke Theseus, leading a hunting party, made his way through the woods. He stopped when he came upon the two fighting cousins, pulled out his own sword, and cried, "Ho! No more, I say, on pain of losing head! By mighty Mars, that one shall soon be dead who smites another stroke that I may see! But tell me now what manner of men ye be?"

"O Sire," Palamon replied, "Kill us both. We deserve it. Two woeful wretches are we, two captives that are **encumbered** by our own sad lives. Here is Arcite, the banished, who has re-entered your land and walks about as one of your squires. I hear that he loves fair Emily. For since the day is come when I must die, I make confession plainly and say on, that I am that same woeful Palamon who has your prison broken, viciously. I am your mortal foe, and it is I who love so hotly Emily the bright. I'll die gladly here within her sight!"

At this, Emily emerged from the crowd of hunters and ladies. Theseus declared that both men should die, but Emily and her ladies began to weep. They cried out for mercy, and Theseus came up with another solution.

"My will is this," said Theseus. "That on this day, fifty weeks hence, both Arcite and Palamon shall be here once again, each with a hundred knights, ready for battle. Whichever of you wins the fight, then he shall have my sister-in-law Emily to be his wife."

The year passed and the cousins prepared for battle. They raised great armies and prayed to the

Gods for victory. Meanwhile, Duke Theseus constructed a giant pavilion in which the war between Arcite and Palamon would be held.

The day finally came, and the cousins arrived—the battle began. Lances were flung full twenty feet in height. Out flashed the swords like silver **burnished** bright. Helmets were hewed, the lacings ripped and shred. Out burst the blood, gushing in stern streams of red.

In the end, Palamon was unhorsed and Arcite held a sword to his cousin's throat. Duke Theseus announced Arcite as the victor. "Hold! No more! For it is done! Now I will prove true judge, of no party. Theban Arcite shall have Emily, who, by his fortune, has her fairly won."

* * *

But it was not done. Before the battle, Palamon had prayed to Venus for victory. When he lost, Venus wept with shame that she could not deliver victory to her knight. She cried to Saturn and, on his command, the earth shook and the gods' vengeance was felt! The unstable earth caused Arcite to fall from his horse, which landed on his chest and crushed him nearly to death.

Arcite was rushed to a nearby bed. As he lay dying, he summoned his sweet Emily to his side and implored her to remember his cousin Palamon. "For love of you and for my jealousy may Jove so surely guide my soul for me. To speak about a lover properly, with all the circumstances, faithfully—that is to say, truth, honor, and knighthood, wisdom, humility and kinship good, and generous soul and all the lover's art—so now may Jove have in my soul his part as in this world, right now, I know of none so worthy to be loved as Palamon. Forget not Palamon, the noble man." Arcite took his last breath and then spoke his final words, "Mercy, Emily!"

After Arcite's burial, there was a great feast and festival held in his honor. Lord Theseus stood up and spoke to Emily. "Sister," quoth he, "you have my full consent, with the advice of this my Parliament, that

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gentle Palamon, your own true knight, who serves you well with will and heart and might, and so has ever, since you knew him first—that you shall, of your grace, allay his thirst by taking him for husband and for lord! Lend me your hand, for this is our accord. And though he were a poor knight bachelor, since he has served you for so many

a year, this ought to weigh with you, it seems to me, for mercy ought to dominate mere right.”

The kingdom applauded and Theseus went on to speak to Palamon. “I think there needs but little sermoning to make you give consent, now, to this thing. Come near, and take your lady by the hand.” ■

*And thus, in all bliss and with melody,
Has Palamon now wedded Emily. . . .
For now has Palamon, in all things, wealth,
Living in bliss, in riches, and in health;
And Emily loved him so tenderly,
And he served her so well and faithfully,
That never word once marred their happiness,
No jealousy, nor other such distress.
Thus ends now Palamon and Emily;
And may God save all this fair company! Amen.*

VOCABULARY WORDS

Dolorous—full of pain, sadness, sorrow; mournful

Tyranny—random or unrestrained exercise of power; a government led by an unjust ruler

Pallor—unusual or extreme paleness, as from fear, ill health, or death

Smitten—very much in love

Strife—vigorous or bitter conflict; rivalry

Procured—to obtain or get by using care

Encumbered—to put a heavy load on; burden

Burnished—to make smooth or glossy